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# Effective conversations about literature in ESL

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# EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT LITERATURE IN ESL

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**Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my husband, Miguel. Thank you for your patience and your support.*

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I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Susan Browne for her guidance and support throughout this research.

## Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis was to investigate how to facilitate effective conversations about shared texts in English as a Second Language lessons. Since effective instructional talk between students and teachers help English learners develop speaking and listening skills, as well as improve their understanding of written texts, students need lots of opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about literature. In the course of this study, six bilingual students practiced to express and elaborate their ideas. They learned to ask their teacher and their peers inferential and critical questions, and respond to those in turn. They discussed stories as well as rules for effective conversations.

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# Chapter 1

# Introduction

## The Beginnings

When I started teaching English as a Second Language, I had no idea what was expected of a teacher in my position as far as lesson planning, writing objectives, and teaching aligned with State Standards was concerned. All these "formalities" seemed a strange concept. I was a passionate English major, a proficient English language learner, and most importantly convinced that I could teach English to children who spoke a different language at home. In my "alternate route" evening classes and my ESL college courses I learned that this "foolish enthusiasm" was the least my evaluators would be looking for. Instead, my effectiveness as a teacher would be assessed based on the behavioral objectives of lesson plans and how closely I would follow the script of these lesson plans.

A decade later, I still struggle with these ideas. I know from personal experience that learning a second language is a life-long endeavor. It is a process happening in stages that might or might not manifest in observable behavior. It takes place while interacting with others who are more proficient and able to model using proper vocabulary and grammar, both in social as well as academic context.

At the beginning of my teaching, I taught children in grades K through eight in various public schools in Camden pulling them out or pushing myself into their classrooms for instruction. I sang, chanted, and danced with 5-year olds and discussed current political issues like immigration reform with middle grade students. I really

enjoyed working with my students, but I also felt overwhelmed and unsupported. I had to borrow and beg for instructional materials, furniture and space. I remember being overjoyed because a classroom teacher gave me an old dry-erase board on creaky wheels.

My instruction was entirely student centered. I would pick materials according to my students' preferences. I read fairy tales with first grade girls and informational texts about space and the International Space Station with older boys. I did not follow scripts; instead, I let the conversation about topics or texts unfold depending on the students' input. Subsequent instruction would be focusing on weaknesses that became apparent during reading, writing or speaking.

**Teaching in the Age of Accountability**

From year one of my career as a teacher, I was held accountable to raise my students' ACCESS scores. The ACCESS is a standardized assessment of English proficiency levels in speaking, reading, listening, and writing. All English learners have to take the assessment in the spring of each school year. The WIDA consortium, which developed and scores the tests, also created English proficiency standards, English as a Second Language teachers have to abide by when planning and delivering instruction. I don't mind having this guideline. Not only do my students regularly improve in proficiency as measured by the ACCESS test, but the WIDA created assessments for placement and measuring progress are realistic and relevant. ACCESS creators know that learning a language is a process, and that each student develops according to his or her own individual strengths and needs based on previous experiences with education and culturally diverse background stories. All ACCESS strives for is to show progress and indentify problem areas for lack thereof.

Unfortunately, things have become much more complicated since the accountability movement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has reached out to English a Second Language classrooms. It created a formula for diverse language learners: If x-amount of English learners do not improve by x-amount of proficiency levels in one year, students fail to make annual measurable achievement objective or AMAO.

Also, lesson plans are now scrutinized by administrators who insist on pre-scripted dialogue and measurable outcomes. I have such a hard time reducing my lesson's objective to a formula like: "At the end of the lesson, the students will be able to define at least 3 out of 4 new vocabulary words."My goal is not to teach a certain amount of vocabulary words my students must memorize. Instead, I aim to increase my students' confidence in seeing themselves as speakers of English. I want them to play with words and sentences as if they were clay and model their utterances as closely as possible to a native speaker's ease without relinquishing their own personality.

**Development of the Research Question**

I began my quest to find a way to reconcile my views of teaching English to diverse language learners with those of administrators who are pressured to present statistics showing growth in numbers. I believe that if I improve my instruction, I will become more effective teaching my students. This, in turn, will eventually lead to higher scores, and administrators will approve.

Naturally, I wondered how I could improve my practices to provide my students with the best instruction possible. How could I help my students develop their English skills with less effort?

In Chapter 2, I highlight what research says about what diverse language learners need to succeed in developing English skills: Experts hold the belief that the most effective way of teaching diverse language learners is to help them develop academic language and reading comprehension. Literature shows that practicing oral proficiency, which are communication skills that enable students to successfully develop and express ideas and opinions, lies at the heart of learning academic language. In other words, students should have many opportunities to talk about issues and concepts. The more students elaborate on their ideas, the better their oral skills become. When this practice of developing speaking skills happens while teachers and students discuss texts they read together, students are able to arrive at a much more profound understanding of those texts. This gives students the opportunity to practice close and critical reading which sharpens their reading comprehension strategies. At the same time, reading, or listening to stories read aloud by the teacher, helps students improve their vocabulary and knowledge of language structure.

Fisher, Frey, and Rothenberg (2008) express this beneficial correlation between conversations about literature and deepening of reading comprehension as follows:

> [W]e are reminded that oracy and literacy are inextricably intertwined. We use talk to prepare students before they read or write, to enhance comprehension and improve writing, and to encourage reflection and self-monitoring after reading and writing. Perhaps most important, we use talk as a means of engaging students in high levels of critical thinking. (p. 117)

I wonder how I can implement effective student-teacher talk about texts in my instruction. What makes discussions between teachers and students effective? What does

effective student-teacher talk look like? As the literature review in the following chapter shows, researchers attach many different terms to this conversation between teachers and students: Instructional conversation, academic conversation, learning discourse, and others. In essence, these researchers agree that scripted dialogue where teachers ask closed and fact-based questions to which they already know the "correct" answers, is not a form of effective instructional discourse. So, if closed, known, or entirely fact based comprehension questions are ineffective, what makes classroom discourse effective for student development of academic language and reading comprehension? What does it mean when students are elaborately talking about texts or concepts? How can the teacher facilitate effective classroom discourse? What happens to the planned lesson when students get the time and opportunity to talk more and more in-depth? How can I make sure that students stay on topic without dominating the discussion or excluding peers? Can I teach them to monitor their noise levels and length of their contributions? I am concerned about both classroom management and the quality of my students' contributions to the discussions.

I am aware that this study's time frame is very limited. At best, I will get only a few questions answered. Fisher et al. (2008) explain that discussion-based lessons need lots of preparation, because students need plenty of opportunities to rehearse procedures, such as sticking to an agreeable noise level, taking turns and so on. However, I will be working with a relatively small group of students that is very eager to please the teacher. We might not become masters of effective student-teacher talk, but we will definitely enjoy discussing stories together.

## Organization of the Thesis

Chapter two provides a review on literature that investigates effective instruction for English learners, specifically with regards to instructional discourse. Chapter three explains the study design, data collection and detailed information on school setting and participants. Chapter four explains and analyzes the study's findings. Chapter five describes the conclusions of this study. It also presents how the study's findings might impact future instruction, and what questions could influence future research.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

### Factors for Success of English Language Learners

In the introduction to their book *Content-Area Conversations. How to Plan Discussion-Based Lessons for Diverse Language Learners,* Fisher et al. (2008) cite a longitudinal study following immigrant students' academic progress over five years in middle and high school (Suarez-Oroczo, Suarez-Oroczo, & Todorova, 2008). Two thirds of these English language learners "saw their grade point averages (GPAs) steadily decline" (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 1). Unfortunately, the study supports the widely observed phenomenon that English learners struggle to keep up with their native English speaking peers while simultaneously trying to learn English and academic content.

Literature reviewed for this study, finds evidence for factors leading to academic failure of English language learners: Many times, educators are unable to help linguistically diverse students develop academic language and construct meaning while reading.

Referring to a 1995 study by Collier, Zwiers (2007) explains the term *academic language*: "The language of schooling is loosely referred to as academic language, the lack of which is cited as a significant cause of low achievement for diverse learners" (p. 94). He continues to elaborate on this explanation.

> Vocabulary is one dimension of academic language, but in-depth understanding of concepts in upper grades requires a student to know how to use additional aspects of English to connect these key words in order to construct the meaning of complex and abstract concepts" (p. 94).

Like their native English speaking peers, English learners cannot experience academic success without developing reading comprehension skills. In her 2009 dissertation, Reece refers to the findings of the Report of National Literacy Panel (August & Shanahan, 2006), which shows that a large part of English learners in U.S. schools "show limited growth in reading achievement" and "lag behind their [. . .] native English speaking peers (p. 1). Reece (2009) explains that the failure to understand texts leads to the inability to become part of the "literary community" and to learn content while reading (p. 2). Since speakers of other languages must memorize the denotation and connotation of simple everyday words, as well as content specific words, make sense of English syntax, navigate the confusing spelling patterns of English, and construct overall meaning of demanding texts, they tend to fall behind their native English speaking peers.

One of the most encouraging findings of the before-mentioned *Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study* is that "social engagement with teachers and peers, as well as students' cognitive inquisitiveness" contributed significantly to achievement (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 1). As Fisher et al. (2008) put it:

> Our most effective tool is the talk we foster in our classrooms. We're not referring to the social chatter of peers making plans for after school (it seems as though that blossoms almost without our help!), nor do we mean the sound of our own voices filling the air. We mean learning discourse – the back-and-forth discussion of ideas that deepens understanding. (p. 1)

Reece (2009) concurs with this stance. She conducted a discourse analysis based on observations of the interaction between a language arts teacher and his diverse language learners while discussing texts. According to Reece, students were able to

understand the texts they were reading on a much deeper level by elaborately talking about them with peers and their teacher. In other words, talking about a concept, an idea, or expressing an opinion develops students' thinking skills and understanding (p. 2). Reece points to the body of research on Instructional Conversation that stresses the importance of effective student-teacher talk about literature as a method to construct meaning (Doherty, Hilbert, Pinal, & Tharp, 2003; Echevarria, 1995; Goldenberg, 1991, 1992). Reece also refers to Au's (2006) research that advocates for teaching students with diverse backgrounds in culturally responsible ways, as a means to bridge the gap between English learners and their native English speaking peers (p. 11).

In their book *Academic Conversations,* Zwiers and Crawford (2011) explain the benefit of discussing literature with English learners as follows: "Conversations during reading build the types of thinking and vocabulary that help students understand the reading on multiple levels" (p. 109). Having these conversations helps English language learners develop reading comprehension skills but they also develop general language skills, like vocabulary and grammar which in turn helps them to better express themselves (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011, p. 10).

**Theories on Learning**

Vygotsky (1978) developed the theory that learning occurs in the context of social interaction with others. We interact by communicating. In elementary classrooms, this communication takes place mainly in form of classroom discourse, both in "social chatter" and academic discourse (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 2). Cummins (1979), the pioneer researcher of bilingual education, called "social chatter" 'basic interpersonal communication skills' (BICS) and academic discourse 'cognitive academic language

proficiency' (CALP). Although Fisher and his co-authors seem to dismiss that acquiring BICS is a cognitively challenging process that requires teacher support and instruction, it still needs to be mastered by English language learners. This might prove to be more difficult when students are placed in bilingual classrooms where they usually socialize with each other in their native language. However, considering that students generally develop basic interpersonal communication skills with less teacher initiative gives evidence of Vygotsky's notion that individuals learn while interacting socially.

**Theories on discourse.** Another reason why learning BICS might be less complex than learning CALP could be because basic interpersonal communication skills are closer to the *primary* Discourse that children acquire in their home environment (Gee, 2001). James Gee introduced the theoretical stance that social languages are embedded within Discourses, a term he coined for social networks or systems of communities. An individual who seeks to successfully interact within a social setting needs to know more than just language; he or she needs to understand specific values, rules, and beliefs of the community. The closer the primary Discourse is to the academic Discourse in the school environment, the smoother is the transition from one to the other for the student. Lydia Mays (2008) writes about the added difficulties diverse language learners face due to the fact that their primary Discourse is in a different language based on different cultural values than the Discourse they need to learn at school. Mays expresses her concern as such: "The academic Discourse and culture of public education is, for the most part, familiar to the mainstream (white, middle-class) population and is thus easier for them to fluidly navigate" (pp. 415–416). On the other hand, the transition from primary Discourse to BICS is easier than to rigorous academic language, because English language learners

with healthy family backgrounds already know how to interact on a social, interpersonal level. They can transfer this skill into the second language, which Cummins (2005) explains with his *Interdependence Hypothesis*:

> [A]lthough the surface aspects (e.g. pronunciation, fluency, etc.) of different languages are clearly separate, there is an underlying cognitive/academic proficiency that is common across languages. This common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive/academic or literacy-related proficiency from one language to another. (p. 4)

**Instructional conversations.** There is an abundance of literature supporting the idea that classroom discourse helps English learners develop academic language and reading comprehension. Reece (2009), whose publication is referenced above, is only one example. Another one is Villar's (1999) dissertation examining how instructional conversations promote English proficiency in diverse language learners. Like Reece, Villar refers to Goldenberg (1992) who argues that "true education – real teaching – involves helping students think, reason, comprehend, and understand important ideas," and that an opportunity to implement this "real teaching" is through "Instructional conversations, or ICs," where "[s]tudents engage in extended discussions – conversations – with the teacher and among themselves" (pp. 316–318). Villar (1999) defines "instructional conversation or IC" as a "dialogue between teacher and learner in which prior knowledge and experiences are woven together with new materials to build higher understanding" (p. 7). Villar's findings include evidence that "there seems to be a relationship between amount of student talk time and the IC rating" (p. 188). In other words, students were more successfully participating in the academic discourse when

they had a greater amount of time to practice oral language. Villar's study also showed that "the typical classroom discussion" following the very predictable pattern of teacher asking a question, student responding, and teacher evaluating the student's response, produced very poor quality discourse. This pattern of discourse is called IRE or Initiation-Response-Evaluation model. Mehan (1979) explains it and discusses the ineffectiveness of this teacher-student interaction in his article "What time is it, Denise?"Asking known information questions in classroom discourse."

**Importance of conversations for English learners.** After conducting his study, Villar (1999) gave the instructional conversation a new definition: "[A]ny communication act in which students and teachers share the floor in reasonable, meaningful, and socially equal terms to use prior knowledge and experiences to construct understanding" (p. 186). Since prior knowledge and experiences are essential for the successful participation in the classroom discourse, the teacher has to build or activate prior knowledge. This is one of many scaffolding strategies widely taught in English as a Second Language (ESL) certification programs, and therefore, regularly practiced by ESL specialists. Scaffolding, i.e. providing support for English language learners, is theoretically supported by Vygotsky's (1978) *Zone of Proximal Development*, the just-right level that provides a starting point for instruction.

Boyd (2000) calls elaborate student talk "student critical turn" (SCTs) - sustained, elaborated utterances that build on preceding discourse" (p. 3). Students use these critical turns of talk to construct meaning of texts or concepts while at the same time developing oral language proficiency. In other words, while interpreting and analyzing texts,

exchanging ideas and expressing opinions about literature, students simultaneously practice English skills.

Zhang (2009) references the findings of the 2006 report by August and Shanahan for the National Literacy Panel on Language-Minority Children and Youth: "[T]he the major impediment for ELLs' reading comprehension is their limited oral English proficiency" (p. 1). She explains that oral language proficiency consists of "four components: vocabulary, syntax, listening comprehension, and oral narratives" (p. 3). She expands on the idea that students need time and opportunity to talk; they actually need to learn an entire set of communication skills, including listening comprehension and the ability to narrate events. Clearly, the IRE model is far removed from this concept.

Coleman and Goldenberg (2010) explain that English learners need to learn both expressive and receptive language. Receptive language enables the listening student to comprehend the teacher's explanations and follow directions. On the other hand, only if the student is given the opportunity to develop expressive language "they can answer questions, participate in discussion, and be successful at showing what they know on assessments" (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010, p. 62).

**Effective classroom discourse.** In order to facilitate effective classroom discourse, the teacher's questions should elicit complex answers from the students; that means, the teacher must ask "authentic questions" to which he or she does not know the answer (Boyd, 2000, p. 16). Boyd (2000) argues that the majority of questions teachers ask in U.S. classrooms are "display questions" to help students recall previously learned facts. They do not target higher thinking skills necessary to connect previously learned

concepts with new ones in order to create new knowledge (Bloom, 1956). Boyd (2012) calls the technique of asking authentic questions "dialogic teaching."

Boyd (2012) argues:

> [E]ffective teachers are those who plan engaging and challenging lessons but then, in the act of teaching, are responsive to student cues. They make decisions to offer students opportunities to shape the scope of discourse – they encourage and allow time for students to talk, and position them to have interpretive authority. (p. 26)

Boyd makes a case for validating student contributions to the lesson by showing them that their ideas are important: "Ensuing discussions are purposeful but not scripted, as teachers and students make decisions and revisions as they compose in the moment" (p. 26). Boyd explains when teachers digress from their lessons' scripts allowing students to elaborate ideas and opinions, the lesson might look "messy" (p. 27). However, if students feel that their contributions to the instructional discourse are taken seriously, they develop the confidence necessary to explore new and, at times, risky ways of expressing themselves. In other words, they are given appropriate opportunities to develop expressive language, which in turn helps them achieve academic goals.

Boyd advocates dialogic instruction despite the fact that digressions from scripted lesson plans are frowned upon "in the current educational climate of scripted education, test rehearsal, and efficient accountability practices" (p. 27).

There are many studies supporting Boyd's views on the importance of providing students with opportunities to express their thoughts and ideas in order to find a way to construct meaning and develop thinking skills.

Sotor et al. (2008) examined small group literature discussions and concluded: "The data indicate that the most productive discussions (whether peer or teacher-led) are structured, focused, occur when students hold the floor for extended periods of time, when students are prompted to discuss texts through open-ended or authentic questions [. . .]" (p. 373).

> [W]hen students interact with others in a group, something collective is produced that is more than the result of the abilities and dispositions of the individuals who comprise the group. Each student brings to the discussion social and cultural values, unique background experiences, prior knowledge and assumptions. (Sotor, et al., 2008, p. 377)

Sotor et al. (2008) analyzed small group discussions organized in book clubs, literacy circles, and similar instructional models providing students with the opportunities to take turns in elaborate talk about texts. The findings of the study showed that if the group focused on personal reactions to literature, "expressive stance," and "critical-analytic stance," the participating students spoke more and more elaborately than in groups that took an efferent stance (Rosenblatt, 1978) by reading for fact-finding.

Nystrand (2006) reviewed research on classroom discussion over an extended period of time, and agrees with Boyd's notion that scripted, and thus limited, teacher-student conversations do not constitute effective classroom discourse: "Effective classroom discourse needs to be understood and practiced not as an executed instructional treatment "yielding" daily measurable achievement gains, but, rather as a medium for instruction" (p. 393). Nystrand opposes the current climate for accountability and

"evidence-based" pedagogy, by advocating for "organically" evolving classroom discourse:

> Dialogically organized instruction involves fewer teacher questions and more conversational turns than recitation, as teachers and students alike contribute their ideas to a discussion in which their understandings evolve during classroom interactions. Open-ended discussion and the exchange of ideas are at the core of the dialogic classroom. (pp. 399–400)

Nystrand rejects the practice of teachers determining detailed questions and what responses they will accept from students before the lesson even begins (p. 400). Nystrand argues that this kind of pre-determined discourse does not support student learning.

**Conclusion**

Since a large body of literature stresses the importance of effective classroom discourse for English learners as a means to develop oral language skills, the purpose of this theses is evaluation, analysis, and reflection on classroom conversation during of English as a Second Language lessons. Fisher et al. (2008) explain that "talk, or oracy, is the foundation of literacy" (p. 8); however, most talk is dominated by teachers and fails to develop students' thinking (p. 10–11). Fisher et al. demand that we "evaluate our own practice for evidence of student talk throughout the day" (p. 20).

Hopefully, this study will provide insights in how to provide more opportunities for students to develop thinking skills, oral proficiency, and deeper understanding of texts through active participation in classroom discourse. Literature reviewed for this study indicates that the quality of teacher initiated questions has a decisive impact on the quantity of student talk. While learning to answer critical questions, rather than reciting

text-based facts, students can practice expressing ideas and opinions. As a matter of course, this is a very ambitious goal for a study that will take a mere few weeks, but as Shagoury and Miller Power (2012) explain developing inquiry skills takes "first small, tentative steps" (p. 8).

## Chapter 3

### Research Design/Methodology

This thesis was the product of "practitioner research," a form of research study which, according to Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), allows teachers to reflect on and improve their practices "with the ultimate purpose of enriching students' learning and life chances"(p. viii). I was not observing and collecting data to analyze general trends and provide statistical information about the effectiveness of a practice, approach, or method, as outside researchers in quantitative and qualitative studies usually do. I was instead an active participant of this study. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain the rationale for teacher research as follows: "The knowledge needed for teachers to teach well and to enhance students' learning opportunities and life chances could not be generated solely by researchers who were centrally positioned outside of schools and classrooms and imported for implementation inside schools" (p. vii).

My study is similar to qualitative research, which is both natural and personal, because the researcher presents findings based on the stance of insiders in narrative reports. However, the qualitative researcher herself is not an active participant reflecting on her own practices, but strives to remain an unbiased observer; whereas, my personal reflections are a vital part of this paper.

Unlike in traditional quantitative and qualitative research, I was not focusing on a specific outcome. I was interested in studying processes, to be more precise: classroom conversations and how the quality of those conversations and the quantity of student talk can be improved by inserting questions into that conversation that ask for more elaborate responses. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) provide a definition for the term "practitioner

research" "where the practitioner is simultaneously a researcher who is continuously engaged in inquiry with the ultimate purpose of enriching students' learning […] (p. viii).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) stress that improvement of teaching can only occur when practitioners, who, after all, decide on how to facilitate student learning daily, embrace changes that lead to improvement of learning (p. 53). If teachers do not "own" the steps leading to change, classroom practices will remain static. Teachers regularly participate in workshops and other professional development activities that are geared to provide "new research-based" information on how to deliver subject matter in more effective ways. Too often, these teachers return to their classrooms, just to continue practicing what seems relevant and effective to *them,* discarding the suggestions and recommendations they just received during the previous professional development session. Shagoury and Miller Power (2012) echo this notion: "For many years, teachers have criticized education research as not being relevant to their needs, or written in a way that fails to connect with their classroom practice" (p. 2). Despite the best intentions of administrators and presenters of such workshops, teachers tend to stick to what works for them in their classrooms; therefore, efforts to improve practices that originate on the outside of classrooms have only very limited effects on teachers' practices. Yet, if teachers initiate change based on their own research and reflection, the effect on instructional practices can be powerful. Cochran-Smith and Lytle explain: "With practitioner inquiry, the individual does not disappear into the collective […]" (p. 55). This exemplifies the idea that practitioner research enables the individual teacher to stand out as active proponent of change rather than passive receiver. "Teachers are surprised

and delighted to realize that research can focus on problems they are trying to solve in their own classrooms […]" (Shagoury & Miller Power, 2012, p. 3).

**Procedure of Study**

As I mentioned before, my goal was to improve the quality of classroom conversations and provide my students' with the opportunity to take on more control of these conversations with the intention to improve the students' oral proficiency. In Chapter II, I discussed what experts and researchers say about the importance of quality discourse and student length of utterances for English learners. In order to assess and study the conversations we had while discussing and analyzing texts we read together, I took field notes, recorded parts of my lessons, and reflected on those notes and recordings while keeping a journal.

At the beginning of the study, I pinpointed the students' oral proficiency levels by analyzing their ACCESS scores in Speaking and Listening from the spring 2014 English test. ACCESS is not an acronym; it is the English proficiency assessment created by the WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment) Consortium, a branch of the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. I also gave the participants a brief speaking assessment based on the WIDA ACCESS Placement Test for English Language Learners. The WIDA Consortium created both assessments; the WIDA English Language Development Standards have been adopted by more than 30 states, including New Jersey. I focused my attention during the speaking assessment on the students' word choice, length of responses, as well as complexity of sentences, and the amount of probing I needed to apply to encourage students to express ideas in longer more complex utterances.

I began the study by teaching students the meaning and application of open-ended questions prompting students to elaborate their answers. I also taught the students a practice called reciprocal questioning. This technique requires the students asking the teacher questions after reading a text within their small group. I posted question stems on the wall behind me to remind students of the language they needed to use when asking and answering questions. To reinforce the practice of asking questions and answering them in academic language, I gave students cards with question starters. With those question starters, students helped each other elaborate on their contributions to the discussion of literature by asking their peers questions like "How do you know that?" "What makes you say that?" "What else could happen in the story?" "What part gave you the clue?" "Can you explain that in a different way?" "I do/do not agree with you, because . . . What do you think about my idea?"When the discussion revolved around a story's character, I provided prompts like "What can we learn from this character?" "Are you like this character?" "Can you explain that?" "How does the character feel about . . .?" "How do you know?" "How does the author present the character?" "What in the text tells gives you the answer?" After each lesson, I reflected on the effectiveness of my approach and adjusted my technique for the following lesson.

The lessons were based on literature that I chose, because I had read it with many English learners in the past. The texts do not include too many unknown words, are relatively short, but are very entertaining at the same time. We read the following titles:

Havill, J. (1986). *Jamaica's find.* New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Kasza, K. (2006). *The dog who cried wolf.* New York, NY: Scholastic.

Krosoczka, J. J. (2002). *Baghead.* New York, NY: Random House.

Pilkey, D. (1999). *The paperboy.* New York, NY: Scholastic.

Simont, M. (2002). *The stray dog.* New York, NY: HarperCollins.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

During our small group instructional sessions I collected data as before mentioned: I read the literature, and recorded the students' responses and questions about the texts. I wrote notes on comprehension and engagement by observing the students' spontaneous remarks and reactions, such as laughter or display of surprise. After the reading, we discussed text-based comprehension problems. Then, I applied the techniques I described above: I asked students inferential and critical questions that required more elaborate responses. I also had students ask me questions during reciprocal questioning activities, and I had students ask peers questions based on question prompts. I record these conversations, listened to the recordings at night, and reflected on both the field notes and voice recordings with help of a journal.

In my analysis I looked for answers to the following questions: How often do students volunteer to participate in the discourse? Who of the six students participates most? Do any of the students initiate a conversation? Are the students who do not participate as frequently distracted, shy, or do they lack speaking or listening skills? Do the techniques I encourage students to participate more frequently? Does the quality of student talk improve with respect to original ideas and opinions, and language proficiency such as word choice, sentence length and complexity? One of the biggest questions arouse in the course of the study: How can I encourage timid students to participate more often and in longer utterances despite the attempt of confident students

to dominate the discussion? I solved this problem by pairing students by personality and having students discuss text passages with an equally timid or outspoken partner.

While listening to the recorded lessons, I focused on my own contributions to the conversation. I made sure to ask as many critical questions as possible. I wanted to get the students' opinions on issues, and I wanted the students explain and defend their ideas when they disagreed with each other? I probed to get students to think more and deeper about a problem. My analysis is a narrative reflection on these questions, as Shagoury and Miller Power (2012) describe: "Findings in teacher research are usually presented as narratives from the classroom, with metaphors a common means of highlighting key findings" (p. 2).

## Context

**The community.** I have been assigned to The Neighborhood Community School as English as a Second Language teacher by the Camden City School District since September 2007, when the newly built school opened its doors to some 550 Pre-K through 8$^{th}$ grade students. The school is located between Westfield Avenue and Federal Street, two major streets in Dudley a neighborhood in east Camden of about 4000 inhabitants, 20% of which are children and adolescents. The neighborhood is predominantly Hispanic; Mexican changarros (typical Mexican food/convenient store), Dominican bodegas (typical Dominican food/convenient store), Salvadorian pupuserias (restaurant that specializes in pupusas, the Salvadorian version of tacos), and Puerto Rican convenient stores, restaurants, bars, and grocery stores, as well as travel agencies and music stores cater to this Latino population and their needs to keep in touch with their cultural backgrounds.

**The school.** Neighborhood Community School shares its premises with a Boys and Girls Club, which many of its students attend after school. The school's demographic background is about 74% Hispanic, with equal enrollment of male and female students. Since the median annual household income in Camden is around 130% of the poverty level, most of the students receive free breakfast, lunch, and dinner during afterschool programs.

The school offers bilingual English/Spanish education in grades Kindergarten through 5th grade. Bilingual teachers instruct students in Kindergarten through 2nd grade mainly in Spanish to ensure that the children learn early literacy and math skills in their native language. From 3rd grade on, bilingual teachers provide instruction in English or Spanish depending on proficiency levels as determined by ACCESS or WIDA ACCESS Placement test scores. As I explained above, the ACCESS is an English proficiency assessment created by the WIDA Consortium of the Wisconsin Center of Education Research. Three English as a Second Language teachers service about 130 English learners in daily small group instruction of 30 to 45 minutes to help them acquire English skills in Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing.

**The classroom.** Ms. Sanchez's (pseudonym) 3rd grade bilingual classroom is bright and spacious. There are 19 students in all. Only three students with low ACCESS or WIDA ACCESS Placement test scores (1-2.5) receive their general instruction in Spanish. Ms. Sanchez teaches content matter to all other students in English. I grouped the students for my instruction according to their English proficiency levels as determined by their spring 2014 ACCESS scores. I named the groups after New Jersey colleges: "Thomas Edison State College," "Kean University," "Rutgers," and

"Princeton." I instruct groups Thomas Edison State College and Princeton at a kidney table at the back of the classroom. I pull out students belonging to the other two groups into the ESL Office where they meet their group members from the bilingual 4th and 5th classrooms. These groups consist of ten to twelve students of similar English proficiency levels.

**The study group.** I decided to ask the students in my "Princeton" group to participate in this study, because it was the group with the highest ACCESS overall scores of 3.4 – 3.9, and, more importantly, because we had established a very good rapport since the beginning of the school year. The students felt at ease sharing their ideas and opinions in our discussions about texts and comprehension strategies. I often found their contributions very interesting.

Another reason why I decided to assign these six students to one group was that while all of the students had very high scores in Listening and Reading Comprehension, 4.0 and above, some showed weakness in expressing themselves in oral and written language. I thought the students with lower scores in Speaking and Writing could benefit from interacting with peers on higher levels of proficiency in these language domains.

At the beginning of the school year, I had assessed the students' reading engagement, fluency, and comprehension skills with help of the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). They scored at the beginning 2nd grade level, DRA score 18-20, which is below grade level, but completely normal for bilingual students who received most of their instruction in Kindergarten through 2nd grade in Spanish. Their ACCESS scores are a strong indication that these students will catch up with native English speaking peers significantly in the course of 3rd grade, and might even be eligible to exit

the bilingual program by the end of the school year. In accordance with the theory of Zone of Proximal Development, I chose literature for this study that is on or slightly above the students' instructional level (Vygostky, 1978).

**The students.** There were two male and four female students in this group. The gender distribution was completely random, as was the students' cultural background; five students came from Mexican families, one student was born in Puerto Rico. As I stated before, the students were grouped according to their scores on the ACCESS English Language Proficiency Test of spring 2014.

Angela is a very bright, but very quiet eight year old girl. She scored 5.0 on the Listening and Reading Comprehension part on the ACCESS English Language Proficiency test. WIDA explains a score of 5.0 as "bridging" or "Knows and uses social and academic language working with grade level material" (WIDA Consortium, 2014). This shows that her skills in receptive language are far superior than her skills in expressive language, i.e. Speaking and Writing, where she scored "emerging" or " Knows and uses some social and academic language with grade level materials" (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010; WIDA Consortium, 2014).

Angela will definitely benefit from having the opportunity to practice speaking with students that are very strong in expressing themselves orally.

Eva, 8, is every teacher's favorite. She is very intelligent, polite, eager to learn and to please, never calls out, but gets very passionate when asked to take a stance in important issues, like pollution and animal welfare. I hoped she would help modeling expressing ideas and opinions in the course of the study.

Ana, the only Puerto Rican student in the group, is nine years old, very outspoken, full of anecdotes, and a champion in drawing on background knowledge when connecting to texts. Her strongest skill is speaking, her weakness is writing.

Hector is a nine year old boy, who is extremely shy. He tends to clam up when I look at him waiting for a response. He will definitely feel more encouraged to speak once the group has learned to converse with less teacher support.

Miguel, 8, is the only other male student in the group and the complete opposite of Hector, because he is very confident, talkative, very outgoing, and displays a great sense of humor. He is too well behaved to take on the role of a class clown, but his contributions to the discussions are humorous and original.

Maria scored 6.0 in Speaking on the ACCESS in spring, a score that puts her on the level with native English speakers. Like Ana, she readily shares anecdotes whenever a text reminds her of a personal experience. She has problems waiting for her turn and likes to call out. In grammar, vocabulary, tone and demeanor she does resemble a native English speaker, but her responses are more spontaneous and less thought-through than the responses of more serious group members like Eva or Angela.

The differences and character traits, experiences, and demeanor made working with this group very interesting. It challenged me to develop techniques to promote the oral language development of all six students throughout the study.

# Chapter 4

# Data Analysis

## Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of my study which centered on the question how I could implement effective student-teacher talk about texts in my instruction as a means to develop oral language skills and reading comprehension. In other words, this chapter examines what effective student-teacher talk might look like in my English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons with this particular group of students.

Although my goal was not to provide a method or pattern of procedures that would be applicable to a large number of students, I detected general trends in the data I collected. As the data shows, I experienced both partial successes in creating a setting for effective and thoughtful conversations about literature, as well as failure since everyone did not participate with the same level of eagerness and confidence. In my findings, I see that several factors stand out as indicators for a successful discussion of literature that allows students to develop, express, and refine their ideas about texts and issues: Comprehension of text, ability to express ideas and thoughts in oral language, and ability to follow conventions of conversations emerged as significant indicators for types of literacy discussion.

Since I knew the students' independent and instructional reading levels, I had no problem finding engaging stories that they would understand without too many problems. I had also assessed their oral English language proficiency; therefore, I was aware that the students were on different levels of speaking proficiency. In theory, I expected that the weaker students would profit from practicing their speaking with more fluent

students; however, I had not taken into account that due to the ease of expressing themselves, the higher proficient speakers would dominate the discussion most of the time. I actually saw greater need for teaching rules of conversations, like turn-taking, hearing the speaker out before offering opinions, and refraining from calling out, than reminding students to apply comprehension strategies, such as making connections to personal experiences or predicting outcomes.

In chapter three, I explained that my data collection of notes, recordings and journal entries was supposed to help me reflect on my practices. I hoped to find ways to help my students develop academic language while exchanging ideas and opinions about literature we read together. Our conversations took place within the setting of our regular ESL instruction. I took the students' reading levels into account when I chose the texts which I based the lessons on. I had determined the students' reading levels both by studying the scores for reading comprehension on the English proficiency test (ACCESS) of spring 2014, and the scores on the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) of October 2014.

Additionally, I took into consideration what I knew about my students' on a personal level, such as their cultural backgrounds and their families, and some of their likes and dislikes.

**Learning From Student Talk**

**Results of speaking assessment.** This analysis of the data will be looking closely at the speaking skills of my study group which consisted of six Latino/Latina students who attend a third grade bilingual classroom. I administered one part of the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) Placement Speaking test individually to

each student as a quick screening tool. I did have the students' Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) scores in speaking from spring 2014, and I had evaluated the students during our ESL lessons since the beginning of the school year, but I wanted to give them all the same questions to compare this specific group of students with each other.

The test consists of a wordless picture story accompanied by a script of questions for the test administrator. I asked the students the scripted questions of the placement test. Looking closely at the individual student's responses on the speaking assessment enabled me to understand each student's speaking habits. Furthermore, it gave me the opportunity to assess how comfortable the students felt answering inferential and critical questions. Since the goal of this study was to improve our conversations, the students needed to be able to answer questions that demonstrate understanding of concepts, themes, and characters beyond the fact-based level. I hoped to gain an understanding how much direct teaching and modeling the students needed, before I could expect the students to be able to ask and answer questions that would lead us on this path.

Although Angela spoke in very low voice hesitating and pausing, showing obvious low confidence in her speaking skills, her responses were accurate at the word level; for example, she was the only student who could name the "bench," while the other students called it "seat" or responded with "I don't know that word." She searched for accurate definitions, like "soccer ball," not just "ball." Her retelling showed that Angela knows English well enough to give an oral recount of a story line. Most importantly, her

Table 1

*Questions and Responses*

| Student | Basic Vocabulary | Specific Vocabulary | Basic Description of Pictures | Elaborate Narration showing Connection | Fact-Based Responses | Inferential/ Critical Responses |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Angela | yes | yes: soccer ball, bench | | Good narration of picture story. | | Good explanation of character's feelings and motivations |
| Hector | yes | - | yes | - | yes | - |
| Miguel | yes | yes: person | | Plenty of background knowledge | yes | Inferential and critical responses. |
| Eva | yes | yes | | Good sentence structure, precise retelling. | | Inferential and critical responses. |
| Maria | yes | yes: upset | | yes | yes | - |
| Ana | yes | - | | Good narration, accuracy in syntax and semantics. | Leader: The principal of the school; he is in charge. | no: The girl is not a leader; she is not in charge. |

responses to inferential and critical questions showed profound insights. She explained her reasoning. For example, she thought a character was feeling "sad," because of his slumped-over posture, and because he was sitting all alone on the sideline of a soccer game. She could also define attributes of leaders and explain how a person could become a leader.

Although Hector consistently scores very high on reading comprehension assessments, which indicates a solid knowledge of English vocabulary and syntax, his timid personality is interfering with his oral proficiency. He remained silent for long periods of time, which made me feel uncomfortable for him. During the screening test, he replied only in one word utterances to fact based questions. He seemed unable to respond to critical questions.

Miguel happily offered his responses and expresses his ideas. He attempted to vary his words while speaking. Instead of calling the character "boy" throughout the conversation, he also called him "the person." Miguel connected to the picture story by explaining that soccer was his favorite sport, and giving an account of his favorite team and all the games he had watched during the World Cup in Brazil.

Eva used complete sentences most of the time when replying to questions. She made meaningful connections to her own life when giving examples to explain concepts like "What is a leader?" Eva could become a great model for the other participants showing how to appropriately respond to questions in our discussions.

Maria, like Eva, responded in complete sentences. She showcased better than basic vocabulary in her replies. For example, she used words like "upset" instead of

"sad." Her weakness was her tendency to get off topic and insert irrelevant anecdotes from her personal life into discussions.

Ana was very proficiently expressing her ideas. Her fluency, word choice, and overall expression were very close to the level of a native speaker. Ana's weakness was responding to critical questions. Her explanations were very fact based throughout the speaking assessment. For example, when I asked her to explain "What makes a person a leader?" she referred to the school's principal as a leader, because of his obvious prominent status, not because of certain characteristics or attributes.

**The importance of probing.** When the students responded only in oneword, short phrases, or with "I don't know" to questions that required more elaborate utterances, I followed up with some probing questions, like "Can you elaborate on that?" "Why do you say that?" or I rephrased the initial question. This way, the short assessment was not only a screening of skills, but an introduction to the language we would use in our lessons for the duration of the study.

Here is an excerpt from the recording of Eva's test:

T: Do you think Mia is a leader?

Eva: Yes!

T: What makes you say that?

Eva: She tells the boy to come and play.

T: How does that make her a leader? Can you explain that?

Eva: A leader is a person who helps others. She is a leader, because she helps the boy.

T: How so?

Eva: She makes him feel better, because now he is on the team. He is having fun playing.

When I first listened to this recording, I realized what effective student-teacher talk entails: It enables the student to express an opinion and develop arguments to support it. I had evidence that Eva knew enough English to answer my probing questions, but more importantly I had an example of what I needed to do to lead her to express and elaborate on an idea.

This is an excerpt of the recording of Ana's test:

T: What is a leader?

Ana: The principal is a leader, because he is in charge of the school.

T: Why is he a leader?

Ana: He is the leader, because he can punish you. For example, if we are in trouble for not following the rules, we have to go to the office. Then the principal gives us suspension.

Clearly, Ana identified "leader" differently than Eva had before her, but her responses show the same skill. She is able to explain a concept and defend her views with an example.

The recording of Miguel's conversation showed that he could very well relate to the picture story and had a wealth of background knowledge concerning soccer. Yet, the more striking finding was that he was externalizing his thinking when he had problems expressing himself.

This is an excerpt of Miguel's responses to the test:

T: What is a leader?

Miguel: Someone who tells others what they have to do?

T: Okay, can you explain that?

Miguel: Mmh. It's hard to think of it. Wait, what was the question again?

T: Can you explain what makes a person a leader?

Miguel: I think it's because they tell people what to do?

T: Why do they do that?

Miguel: Oh, wait! Now, I got it! Leaders tell others what to do, because they know more. They are smart and intelligent.

By pausing, asking for repetition of questions, and explanations of the problem, Miguel shows how he leans on the dialogue to develop a meaningful response to questions. His remark "It's hard to think of it," shows that he is aware of his thought processes, a sign of metacognitive awareness.

**Conclusion of the speaking test.** All six students had shown sufficient ability to use basic vocabulary to recount simple stories based on pictures. The students' levels of confidence differed with regards to expression, word choice, and ability to respond to questions that required more than a mere literal understanding of a concept. I hoped that the students would help each other improve their conversation skills in the upcoming lessons. I saw my task in providing time and opportunity to practice those skills while simultaneously teaching the language necessary to ask and answer questions that would guide them to develop ideas and understanding of concepts while discussing engaging children's literature.

**Discussion of *The Stray Dog***

I had decided on the text and my questions. Apart from presenting an enjoyable piece of literature, my goal was guiding the students to discuss real life issues based on the story. I hoped that the students would refine their thinking and develop opinions in the course of the discussion. I wanted them to decide on a solution to the problem of what to do if they found a friendly little stray dog.

With the exception of Hector, all students were able to offer very insightful contributions to the discussion. I sparked the conversation by asking the students to think about whether leaving the friendly little dog behind was a good idea. This initiated a very lively discussion about the issue of stray dogs and what to do when you find one.

Excerpts from the discussion:

T: Should the family have taken the little dog home?

Miguel: Yes, because they have to keep it safe.

Maria: No, you can't just take a dog home.

Eva: But the mother said that it had an owner who would miss it.

Ana: But if he had an owner he wouldn't be in the park alone.

Maria: Maybe someone left the gate open or they did not want him anymore.

T: What do you think Hector?

Hector: Mmh. (No response)

Ana: But if you leave it all alone, it won't have food. They should have taken Willie home.

T: Angela, what do you think?

Angela responds inaudibly.

Miguel: I can't hear her.

Maria: Speak louder!

T: Okay, let's focus. You are saying, it is dangerous to leave the dog all by himself. So, what can the family do?

Maria: Take him and make signs that they can hang everywhere with a picture.

T: That's a good idea. They could take him home and post signs hoping to find the owner. What else could they do?

Maria: I know! Call the police.

Miguel: The dog is not a criminal, why should you call the police?!

Ana: No, call the shelter.

Maria, Miguel simultaneously: Who?!

Ana: Remember the story we read. No, it was not a story. It was about the animal shelter. They take care of lost pets.

Eva: That's a great idea. They should take the dog there and the shelter will find the owner.

Ana: Yes, they look for the thing in the back. What was it called?

T: A micro-chip?

Angela (a little louder): But the kids will miss Willie.

Maria, Miguel simultaneously: Yes!

T: Hector, do you have anything to say? Do you agree with Eva and Ana or with Angela?

Hector: Mmh.

T: Eva, you raised your hand?

Eva: They could take the dog to the shelter and after a week they could come back and ask whether he is still there and then they can adopt him.

T: I love the word "adopt."

Miguel: That's a good idea Eva.

Ana: Yes, because Eva is smart.

Obviously, this discussion showed that the students were able to develop ideas to solve real-life problems while bouncing ideas back and forth. The discussion was very lively, and the group's contributions were often overlapping, but at times, the students listened and responded to each other which definitely improved their ability to hone in on a solution. Arguments for not taking somebody else's pet, arguments for taking the dog to keep him save, and inferences about whether a dog that has an owner would be alone in a park, led to the very thoughtful conclusion that the family should have secured the dog's safety by calling the animal shelter, who would try to find an owner by scanning the dog for microchips or hanging up "dog found" posters in the neighborhood. The students agreed on that the family could check after some days and adopt the dog if no previous owner had come forth to claim him.

Unfortunately, the students lacked the skills necessary to discuss issues in an orderly, organized way. Most of the time, at least two students spoke simultaneously. Maria, Ana, and Miguel could not hold back when an idea popped into their heads; that is why, Eva and Angela did not get the same opportunities to utter original ideas than the other three students.

I am really stunned by this problem. On the one hand, I do not want the students to hold back their ideas, but I want them to appreciate other students'

contributions and listen to them. Maria remarked very rudely, "But she speaks so low, I can't hear her; it bores me!" when I asked her to listen to Angela arguments in the discussion. When I told Ana to let another student talk, she actually shut down, and did not participate for at least five minutes. How can I support the participation of all students in the discussion?

It's strange. I am grappling more with my students' personalities than their oral language proficiency or their thinking skills. I hope that time and practice will ameliorate this problem. (research journal, November 2014)

So far, the data showed me three major tendencies:

1. The majority of the students were able to refine ideas and opinions in the course of a discussion.
2. Ana, Maria, and Miguel dominated the conversation, while Eva and Angela politely waited their turns to offer their contributions. Hector would or could not participate.
3. The group needed to learn to respect each other's right to take a turn while discussing texts.

**The "Discussion Rules" Poster**

Instead of sharing another story with the group during the next lesson, I decided to have a brainstorming session about discussion rules. I thought it important that the students felt empowered to develop their own rules as a motivational tool to help them abiding by these rules during our conversations.

The participants shared their opinions in their typically lively and engaged manner. Miguel accused Maria of "always talking and never listening." Maria basically

said that she did not care what he thought. Eva tried to mitigate by stating the obvious: "We cannot discuss things, if we all talk at the same time."I supported Eva by explaining that we all need to follow rules when we play games; otherwise, we would not be able to enjoy playing with each other. Maria concurred hesitantly.

We then created a poster summarizing our findings. I displayed the poster "Our Discussion Rules" in the ESL corner to remind us all about what we had decided on. The rules were:

Only one person can talk at a time.

We all listen to the one speaking.

We may not interrupt the speaker.

We all get to talk.

We have to wait our turn to speak.

I was curious to find out whether the lesson about discussion rules would improve my students' conduct during our next session. At the same time, I worried that I might scare them to express themselves. The tension between managing student behavior and creating a platform for open discussions seemed to dominate this study more than I had expected. I wrote in my journal:

> The literature (Fisher et al., 2008; Zwiers & Crawford, 2011) I reviewed in preparation for my study focuses more on the quality of contributions the students make than management of student behavior. I don't want to scare them not to talk; I just want all of them to get the opportunity to do so, because I know they all have interesting thoughts and ideas. (research journal, November 2014)

The literature I had consulted before beginning this study, had not prepared me for the task of facilitating conversations that allowed all students to express themselves equally. The focus of the publications I discussed in Chapter two is showing that elaborate discussions improve English skills and academic language in diverse language learners. Without conducting this study, I would not have realized how hard the process of managing the conversation would be due to my students' personalities. Although outgoing students, like Ana and Maria, served as excellent models in speaking and arguing during the discussion, they seemed to hinder or frighten more timid students, like Angela and Enrique. At this point, I hoped that both our discussion rule poster and daily practice would help improve the social skills necessary to help all participants develop their conversation skills.

**Discussion of *The Paperboy***

The students had listened to their classroom teacher read the story aloud last week. I did not read the story again, because the students were able to explain the plot. When I asked whether the students liked the story, they all said "yes" or "no," but were unable to give reasons for their opinions. I thought this strange. This group was normally eager to express likes and dislikes. I decided to reread parts and probe to guide students to think about the boy's character traits, such as devoted to his job, diligent, and helpful, because he helps people get the news.

I noticed that the students had problems to discern between factual questions and inferential questions. For example, when I asked them about the relationship between the boy and the dog, they described all the things they do together, but had a hard time to define their relationship as being "best friends."

Unlike during the discussion of *The Stray Dog*, the discussion was very quiet and orderly. I was worried that I had stifled the students' eagerness to express themselves by insisting on the group abide by the rules. When we revisited a particular part of the book, because Ana had a question about how the newspaper got to the Paperboy's house, the students reacted with great concern. The illustration depicted the boy leaving the garage door open when he left to deliver the paper. All six students thought it too dangerous to leave the door open, because criminals could enter the house and steal or kill the rest of the family. At this moment, the students who live in a poor and high-crime urban environment all made connections to their personal experiences with theft, murders or other unfortunate incidents they had witnessed or heard about.

I brought the discussion's focus back to the book by explaining that the paperboy lived in a small town where everybody knew each other and where it was safe for a boy to ride his bike through the neighborhood during the early morning hours when it was still dark.

Reflecting on the lesson, I drew several conclusions:

I noticed that the students had tried to be more patient with Hector, the timid boy, and Angela, who spoke so low, we could hardly hear what she said. I heard Miguel and Maria address these students with encouraging expressions like, "speak up, Angela" and "you can do it, Hector!"

Secondly, I believe that the students were unable to connect to this particular text on a personal level. Rosenblatt (1978) explained that the individual reader understands and responds to texts in a unique way depending on personal background knowledge and prior experiences. Au (2006) extended this theory to culturally diverse readers and

concluded that teachers must keep the students' cultural backgrounds in mind to support their comprehension of texts. The discussion of *The Paperboy* exemplified these perceptions in a very palpable way. My urban students could not relate to a story about a child who rides his bike through town in the dark early morning hours; instead, they could not suppress anxiety and concern about leaving doors open and unlocked.

The ultimate goal of our conversations was to arrive at an understanding of texts that went deeper than just the fact-based, "main idea – details" level that they normally experience in literacy instructions. That meant that my students needed to be able to ask and answer clarifying (Can you explain that?) and interpretive questions (How, why?) about the literature they read (Fisher et al., 2008, p. 86). Quite simply, my students had to learn connect to fictional characters and their unique situations on a personal level. The discussion of The Paperboy had shown that students fail to connect to texts if they lack background knowledge or schema.

Lastly, I felt that the students needed more opportunities to control the discussion. So far, it had been me, the teacher, guiding the discussion with questions. I decided to have the students ask questions about the next story. I decided to support the students by providing them with sentence starters on cards that I created for them. I wanted to make sure that the students stayed on topic, asked questions that required inferential and critical thinking, and that they had the necessary support to express themselves in English. Fisher et al. (2008) write: " We find it useful to provide sentences starters related to the different types of thinking necessary in any learning environment" (p. 95).

**Discussion of *Baghead***

Leaning on Fisher et al. (2008) recommendations, I introduced the lesson by explaining that it was the students' turn to act as the teacher and ask me questions. The students were very excited. I gave them cards with question stems to initiate questions such as "Can you explain that?" "Why do you think so?" "Why did the author write that?" "Why does the character do that?" "Where in the text does it say that?""What kind of person is the main character?""Can you give me another reason why?"

When I showed them the title page, they all started to ask me questions at the same time: "Why is he wearing a bag?" "Is that his real face?" Miguel tried to bring order to the conversation by reminding his peers, "One at a time! One at a time!" He then made a connection to a movie scene where a character cut holes for eyes and mouth into a paper bag.

Eva, following rules as always, had her hand raised and patiently waited to be called on. Then, she read her question confident of the fact that it was surely the most relevant question at that point: "Why does the character do that?" I responded: "I don't know. I have to read the story first, but you gave me a great purpose for reading the story!" Setting purpose for reading a text had been the objective of previous lessons. While we read various texts during the study, I liked to remind students of the strategies good readers use before, during, and after reading. At this point, Ana shouted out her question: "Why did the author write the story?" I repeated my response; I had to read the story first to find out. While I read, Maria made predictions about what will happen next, for example: "The teacher will say that he cannot go to school like that with a bag on his

head." She also tried to infer why the boy was wearing the bag: "Oh, he put the bag, because he forgot his book report!"

The story had captured all the students' attention. They discussed their guesses, verified predictions and agreed or disagreed with each other's ideas. When I revealed the picture showing the boy without the bag, there was a moment of silence. Eva grasped the opportunity to explain the boy's actions: "He wore a bag, because he had tried to cut his hair, and realized that he looked awful!"Maria, Miguel, and Ana all chimed in with: "Oh, now I get it! Now, I understand!"

I reminded the group that it was their turn now to ask me questions. Ana asked a very obvious one: "Where did he get the idea to cut his own hair?" I responded that he obviously acted on a silly idea. Miguel immediately followed up with "Can you explain that?" Ana repeated her question: "Why did the author write that?" Before I had the chance to respond to her question, Miguel replied: "Because he wanted to write a funny story!" He had obviously understood the entertaining quality of the book.

For the first time, it was the students who led the discussion. When I offered my replies to the students' questions, I frequently asked them whether they agreed with me or disagreed; this way, I extended the amount of time the students were talking and the students had the opportunity to evaluate my responses. I hoped that this practice would eventually lead my students to agree or disagree with each others' contributions.

The discussion was not as orderly as I had wanted it to be, but the students were very engaged while asking relevant inferential and critical questions. Although Angela and Hector did not voice their opinions, I observed that they attentively listened to their peers' utterances throughout the discussion. Fisher et al. (2008) explain: "The academic

language of the speaker is only one side of the equation – the listener also has responsibilities" (p. 97). I realized that although Angela and Hector did not speak much, they definitely listened more than their peers. Hopefully, this would help them develop oral English on their own terms.

**Discussion about *The Dog Who Cried Wolf***

So far, we had practiced several discussion formats: Initially, the students responded to the teacher's questions. With probing, the teacher guided the discussion to help students develop their ideas, elaborate their opinions, and take a stance in the discussion. Next, we had cooperated to find a common ground for rules in our discussions. Then, I had given them the task of asking me questions to give them the opportunity to control the discussion. I answered the questions, but always gave the students the chance to speak more by asking them to agree or disagree with me and explain their reasoning.

The questions I had taught the students required them to take a stance, to express an opinion about a story event, a character's motives, or an author's purpose. These questions helped my students interpret the texts we shared on inferential and critical levels. However, if I wanted them to develop ideas and construct comprehension, the students needed to learn to respond to each others' ideas; therefore, I thought it important to help my students develop the skill to elaborate or explain their answers without too much prompting. Mehan (1979) had explained that the common format of instructional conversations of teacher asks question, student responds, teacher evaluates, and goes on to the next question, the so called Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) model, was an ineffective although widely practiced instructional tool. The conversation would be much

more effective if the teacher asked the students to elaborate and explain their answers. What could I do to teach the students to explain their answers automatically?

Before I read the new story, I gave students new cards with the conversation starters: "I think _____, because . . ."or "The character _____, because . . ."and "I agree with you, because . . ." "I disagree with you, because . . ." I briefly modeled completing these sentence starters with *Baghead*. Then, I asked the participants to use the cards to respond to both my ideas, as well as each others' ideas, and explain their opinions. I thought that providing a conversation stem that automatically led to the student explaining why he or she had come up with an idea would help.

While I read the story to the group, we discussed details the students could explain by referring to the text: "How does the character feel?" Answer: "He feels miserable, because it says so in the text." Or "He is hungry, because he cannot catch animals to eat."The students also made connections to personal experiences while trying to understand the characters' feelings and motivations: "He runs away, because he wants to be free."The students used the "I agree/I disagree" cards to respond to each others' arguments.

Here is an excerpt of the conversation about *The Dog Who Cried Wolf*:

T: So, I think Moka does not like to be a pet.

Miguel: I agree with you, because he runs away.

Maria: I agree with you, because he thinks wolves are awesome.

Angela: I agree with you.

T: Why do you agree with me, Angela?

Angela: Because he likes wolves.

T: Yes, he thinks they are fascinating.

Miguel: Why did the author write that?

T: Oh, I love your question! What do you guys think? Can anyone answer Miguel's question?

Eva: It shows why Moka runs away.

T: Exactly, Eva! It explains why the little dog runs away.

Miguel: Can you explain why he wants to be a wolf?

Maria: Because he thinks they're awesome!

Miguel: Hector wants to ask a question.

T: Okay, Hector, go ahead.

Maria starts to say something, but Miguel shushes her.

Hector: What kind of person is the main character?

T: I think he is like a little boy who wants to do whatever he can think of.

Miguel: Yes! He wants to run around free.

The excerpt shows that the students kept asking clarifying and interpretive questions I had given them the day before, such as "Why did the author write that?""Can you explain why he wants to be a wolf?" "What kind of person is the main character?" Providing a scaffold for the conversation with help of sentence starters had proved to be an excellent tool to help improve the quality of our conversations. In a very short amount of time, all six English learning students had learned to ask and answer inferential and critical questions of their teacher and with limitation of each other; although they did not participate in the discussion with equal level of confidence. The three remaining study participants where actively listening. I hoped that the group was on its way to learn how

to routinely participate in effective student-teacher talk about texts. The following journal entry might indicate further evidence for this desired outcome:

> I asked the group to consider what the author was trying to tell us with the story. They all agreed that the author's purpose was "entertaining the reader."Ana surprised me pleasantly by trying to form an opinion about the story's underlying messages. She tried to explain why a person would want to be someone else. In the pre-test as well as during previous discussions, Ana had always been very literal in her contributions. Here she showed that she starts making inferences about texts. (research journal, November 2014)

**Discussion of *Jamaica's Find***

Since the question and conversation starters had been such a successful means to help students ask and answer questions that helped them clarify their comprehension and interpret texts, I decided to write the question and conversation starters on an anchor chart and post it behind me to help remind the students of the language they were supposed to use during discussion time. I also wondered about how to reinforce discussion rules. I could split the group into pairs, but I did not want to do that yet. I wanted to give my students more time to practice bouncing ideas back and forth while discussing them ideas with the entire study group.

During the following lesson, we first discussed the anchor chart with question stems. When I began to explain why we ask these questions, Miguel interjected that we used the question starters to "talk more about something important in the story."I was pleasantly surprised by his comment, because once again I saw evidence for Vygotsky's (1978) theory that learning occurs during social interactions or applications of skill or

concept in social context. I had modeled the questions while I gave the pre-assessment and during our literature discussions. I had then given the students question starters on cards to help them initiate the conversation. I had not explicitly mentioned that the questions' purpose was to initiate more elaborate and thoughtful responses. Miguel had come to this conclusion by himself and was now able to share this knowledge with his peers.

I then reviewed our discussion rules with the group. We concluded that we would try to adhere to the rules to help the more timid students express themselves to a greater extent.

After reading the story *Jamaica' s Find* with the students, I decided to probe less than usual to help students elaborate on their responses. I asked the students what questions they would ask to spark a group discussion. First, the students were trying to agree on the author's purpose for writing the story. Miguel, Ana, and Maria agreed that the author had written the story to teach readers that they have to return items they might find to the rightful owners, even if they liked the items very much. Basically, the students had drawn the conclusion that the story's theme was about doing the right thing.

Then, Hector asked the group "What kind of person is Jamaica?"Responses like "a human girl" or "a little girl" showed that the students needed an explanation that they were asked to identify character traits by making inference about the character's motives and actions. My explanation initiated a discussion about how to best describe the main character. The students offered descriptive adjectives, like "smart, clever, nice" in rapid sequence, but were unable to explain their answers.

I reminded them that there were no right or wrong answers to many issues we discuss, but that we always had to be prepared to explain why we took a stance. At this point, Ana expressed that she thought the main character was a helpful person, because she had brought the dog and its owner back together.

I addressed Hector, the quiet student, asking him whether the main character had always done the right thing in the story. Hector explained that the girl had initially thought of keeping the dog, because she had liked it so much. I actually held my breath while listening to the recording at this point, because I had just listened to the longest utterance Hector had volunteered during the entire study. He was taking small and very safe steps, but the thought that he had finally begun to speak made me confident that he would continue to open up in the course of the year.

Then I asked the group to think about what had changed the character's mind about keeping the dog. "Why do you think she took it to Lost and Found after all?" I was surprised, because Ana, Miguel, and Maria responded almost simultaneously explaining that it was because of a comment the girl overheard her mother make when she first brought the dog home. The students responded so quickly to my question that I thought they had anticipated it from the moment I had addressed Hector with the request to remind us of the girl's initial motives and actions.

> So far, I have taught them to ask meaningful questions about texts. I'm glad they know why we are asking so many questions, too. I have also tried to get them to explain their thinking with help of sentence starters, such as "I agree/ disagree with you, because . . ." What would it take to have them practice bouncing questions back and forth to engage in a real discussion? How can I make them ask

questions, explain their ideas and views and thus shape new insights? (research journal, November 2014)

I concluded that it was time to provide all students with more talk time by dividing them into pairs.

### *Jamaica's Find* Revisited

Since Eva had been absent the day prior, I asked the students to read the story to her and to recap the important conclusions we had drawn about the story so far.

I then divided the students into pairs. I paired Angela with Eva, because Angela needed a good model to help her develop speaking skills and confidence. Eva is very fluent, but also very polite. I knew she would give Angela the necessary time and opportunities to talk. I paired Hector with Miguel for similar reasons. Lastly, I thought Ana was strong enough to resist Maria's impulsive nature of always trying to dominate the conversation.

I gave the pairs separate short passages of the story and told them to ask and answer each others' questions with help of the question starters or original questions they might come up with by themselves. Additionally, I gave each pair one key question about their specific passage.

It was difficult for me to keep up with three discussions at the same time, but I managed to observe that all students stayed on topic; even, when the talk occasionally slipped into Spanish. I felt that I had made the right decision to divide the students into pairs for discussion when I listened in on Eva's and Angela's conversation.

Here is an excerpt from the recording:

Eva: Why do you think Jamaica is happy like Kristin when she gives her the dog?

Angela: Because she feels happy for Kristin.

Eva: Can you explain that?

Angela: She is happy, because she made the right decision.

Eva: I agree with you, because she makes Kristin happy with her Edgar dog. First, she wanted to keep the dog, but then she made the hard choice. She took it to Lost and Found.

Angela: And then she felt bad for the dog on the shelf. . .

Eva: That's right! Now, she's happy for both.

The script shows that Angela felt much more confident about voicing her ideas in one-on-one conversations with Eva than when asked to discuss with the entire group. It gives her more opportunities to practice speaking and therefore developing an understanding of the text.

Miguel and Hector had a similarly captivating discussion about all the things they had found in their lives and whether they had made the decision to return them or keep them. They switched in and out of Spanish. While listening to the recording I noted in my journal:

> Just like Angela, Hector feels more at ease when talking to Miguel alone, instead of the whole group, but he is still very quiet. Miguel speaks more, both in English and Spanish. I guess, Hector is just a reluctant speaker. He might be more inclined to express his ideas in writing, which allows him to develop his ideas in a more private and personal (?) way. In the meantime, Miguel makes great connections to personal experiences. His explanation about better not eating candy when you

find it, because you don't know whether it is safe to eat, is a typical example. (research journal, November 2004)

Maria and Ana had a long discussion about how to approach answering the question I had given them. The character told her mother that she had found a red hat and turned it into the Lost and Found office, because it didn't fit her. I asked them "What does mother mean when she says: "Maybe the dog doesn't fit you either"? (Havill, 1986, p. 15). They discussed whether there was a literal response to that question:

Maria: What does mother mean when she says: "Maybe the dog doesn't fit you either?"

Ana: I think that the mother says that because Jamaica is too old and the dog is too babyish for her.

Maria: I agree with you, because I think that's the right answer.

T: I don't think that mother said that because of Jamaica's age. Everyone loves stuffed animals, even adults. I don't think that you can ever be too old for a stuffed dog like that.

Maria: So, why does she say it?

Ana: I don't know. What do you think?

Maria: Mmh.

Ana: You were supposed to write number 1, and I do number 2.

Maria: No, we were not writing, we are talking!

Ana: So, mom does not want the dog in the house, maybe because it has germs.

Maria: Yes, I agree!

Ana: Maybe because her mom wants Jamaica to give the dog to the Lost and Found.

Here, I'll write it now.

Ana successfully inferred what the girl's mother had meant with her comment. Clearly, the students needed guidance to arrive at that point, but I had not given them a clue, only a slight push to keep on thinking.

Although the students were not required to write their responses, Ana took the initiative to answer my question for the discussion in writing.

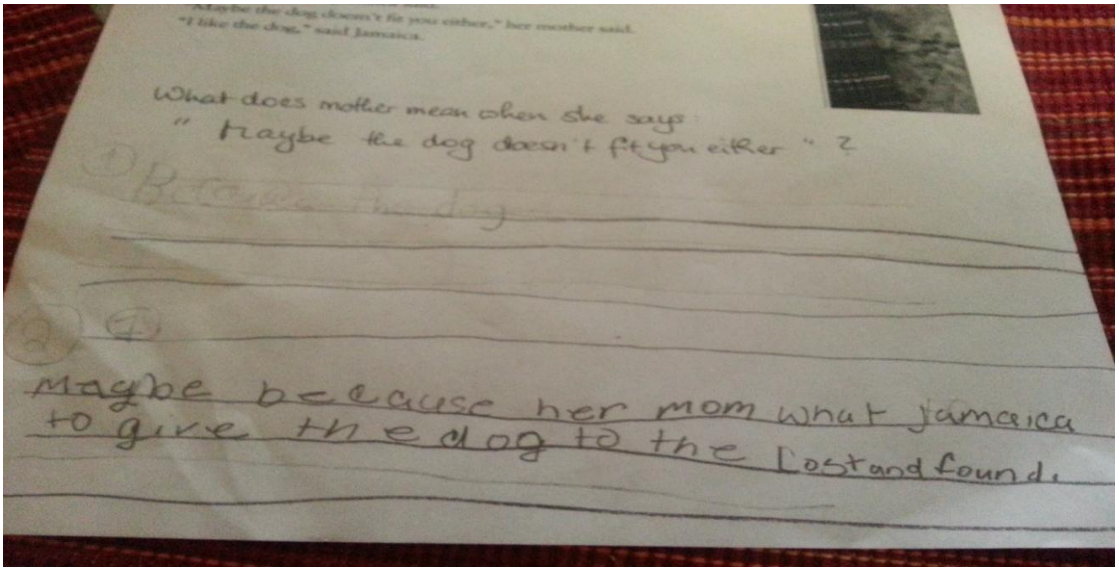


*Figure 1*. Ana's response in writing.

**Summary**

The goal of this study had been to examine how I could facilitate effective conversations about literature in my lesson. The data analysis showed me that modeling asking interpretive and clarifying questions helped students adopt the language necessary to participate in effective conversations. I demonstrated, guided, scaffolded, and released

responsibility over the discussion gradually to my students, just as I would with any skill that I generally teach.

Once the students were confident in using those clarifying questions such as “Can you explain that?” “Why do you say that?” and interpretive questions such as “Why does the character, or the author, do that?”I started teaching them to explain their views. Ultimately, I wanted the students to arrive at a deeper understanding of the literature we were sharing by refining their ideas by means of conversations. Supporting their efforts with tools like question stems and conversation starters, proved to be a successful way of leading them into the right direction.

The data showed me that all six students could form an opinion and develop ideas through conversations with the teacher and peers. The data also showed that the students constructed very profound comprehension about various fictional characters’ motives and actions. They applied skills such as predicting, inferencing, and drawing conclusions. The students were able to refine and change their initial ideas in the course of discussions.

The data also shone light on some problem areas. Successful conversations require the participants to abide by certain rules such as waiting for turns, refraining from interrupting others, willingness to express ones ideas, and ability to listen to others. Based on their personalities, five out of six students had problems with at least one of these aspects of effective discussion. Outgoing students disregarded the quiet students’ rights to take turns; timid students proved to be better listeners, but withheld their own contributions. Only when I divided the group into pairs, the students’ contributions were more balanced in length and depth, as well as speaking and listening. Going forward, I will most likely give my students plenty of practice in forming, defending, and refining

their ideas while speaking and listening to a partner in pairs before expecting them to succeed in group discussions.

Although this study has ended, my endeavor to improve my instructional conversations has not. I found that teaching the students the skill of asking and answering authentic questions that required inferential and critical thinking was not as hard as I had expected. I will continue practicing implementation of meaningful talk about fiction and non-fiction with all my diverse language learners. I have seen that with help of scaffolding tools, such as sentence starters, students quickly learn the language necessary to participate in interpretations and analysis of texts. Lower proficient students might be successful with more direct instruction. I am confident that the participants of this study group will master many of the conversation skills I briefly introduced in the course of this study.

# Chapter 5

## Summary, Conclusions, Limitations and Implications for the Field

### Summary

Fisher et al. (2008) explain that talk "is the representation of thinking." (p. 5). Therefore, "classrooms should be filled with talk" (p. 5). The goal of this study was to examine how I could implement effective talk about literature driven by inferential and critical, clarifying and interpreting questions in my small group English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. The analysis of the data showed that the six bilingual third grade students who participated in this study were able to have very insightful conversations about the texts we shared provided I offered appropriate support and guidance. For the duration of the study, my task was to facilitate meaningful conversations that helped the students to express their thoughts, develop ideas, and defend the opinions they had formed.

I chose literature that would match the students' reading levels which I had determined with help of the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and the reading comprehension scores from spring 2014 on the Assessing Communication and Comprehension in English from State-to-State (ACCESS).

Before I began discussing *The Stray Dog, The Paperboy, Baghead, The Dog Who Cried Wolf,* and *Jamaica's Find,* I gave the participants a quick speaking assessment with the World-Class Instructional Design (WIDA) Placement test. I compared the students' ability to use basic or specific vocabulary, give simple description of pictures or narrate a more complex story line, and answer inferential or critical questions. I collected the findings in Table 1.

At the beginning of the study, I asked questions that required the students to develop ideas about issues or motives and actions of fictional characters. My students showed great mastery in making connection to their own lives, to previously learned concepts, and their own feelings. Next, I taught them how to ask me and their peers' questions that would lead to elaboration or refinement of ideas. I provided them with question stems such as "What makes you say that?" "Can you give another example?" "What kind of person is . . .?" "Why did the author write . . . ?"I then used the same strategy of giving them sentence starters to help my students respond to a statement with "I agree with you, because . . ." or "I disagree with you, because . . ." I always explained that there were no right or wrong answers; the importance was that the students could explain their point of view. Finally, I gave them the opportunity to take on control over the discussion by pairing them with a partner that would complement their personalities while talking to one another.

With help of my recordings and my reflections I gathered in a journal, I saw trends and made adjustments to the following day's instruction. For example, my students' personalities made it difficult to have an orderly discussion during which all participants had equal opportunities to take turns and express opinions. Three students tried to dominate the discussion and could not hold back when an idea popped into their minds; two students were so timid and quiet, they would not speak up even when I stepped in and forced the more outgoing students to suppress their urges to utter their views. Only one student, Eva, waited her turn, and stunned the group with her profound insights. Due to this problem, I dedicated a whole lesson to creating a discussion rule poster. The brainstorming activity showed that all students understood that turn-taking

was essential for a successful discussion, but abiding by the rules proved still a very difficult practice.

When I paired confident with timid speakers, and the two most outgoing students with each other, I could observe the best balance in quantity and quality of contributions. It showed me that the students had learned to express their thoughts and elaborate on them while exchanging ideas about texts. With little probing, the students derived at a comprehension of texts that would penetrate the mere fact-based level.

**Conclusions**

The study showed that with appropriate support English learners can develop academic language, in this case the language of inferential, critical, clarifying, and interpreting questions and responses, while simultaneously reaching a better understanding of texts. Naturally, the students needed to understand the stories well, as far as vocabulary and plot were concerned, before trying to interpret them on a deeper level. That is why, I took the students' reading levels into consideration when I chose the books. In the course of the study, I realized that the key to helping students learn the skills of asking and answering more complex questions about texts was to model, provide opportunities for student practice, and gradually release responsibility over the learning process to the students (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Scaffolding while students practiced with me or their peers, in form of providing cards and later a poster with sentence and question starters, proved very helpful.

Major obstacles for students participating in effective conversations during which they would develop and elaborate their views seemed to lie with the individual students' personalities. Some students were very outspoken and had difficulties refraining from

calling out, or interrupting others; other students were too timid to express their ideas. Since I experienced a slight improvement of both tendencies in the course of the study, I assume that the social skills necessary to participate in effective conversations can be improved through plenty of practice.

When I asked the students to discuss *The Paperboy*, I observed my students' apparent difficulties in relating to texts that showed circumstances they could not experience in their own lives. *The Paperboy* depicts a young boy delivering the newspaper on his bike in the dark early hours of the day. My students were both very concerned about the boy cycling in the dark by himself and by the fact that the boy left the garage door open when he left on his delivery route. Since my students' experiences are based on growing up in a high crime and low income environment, the only lively discussion we had based on this book was about crime and safety, not about the *Paperboys* work ethic or friendship with his dog. I was reminded of Au's (2001) theories on culturally responsive instruction.

**Limitations**

The length of this study was very limited. As I mentioned before, providing students with plenty of opportunities and time to practice the skills seems to be the key to implementing effective conversations in an instructional setting. I will continue to provide time and place for discussions about texts throughout the remainder of the school year.

Another limitation was the number of students participating in the study. Observing a greater number of students might lead to different findings. I am aware that

my findings rely very much on the interactions between my small group of participants and myself.

I chose my participants because their English comprehension was fairly high. Lower proficient English learners would certainly face much more problems trying to express their opinions about texts due to limited skills in oral language.

Lastly, I limited the study by providing a set amount of texts without giving the students the opportunity to choose what they wanted to read and discuss. I chose texts I like to read with children. Had I given the group the opportunity to decide on their own reading list, our conversations might have gone in completely different directions.

**Implications for the Field**

After completing my data analysis, I realized that facilitating effective student-teacher talk in ESL instruction could be investigated on a much larger scale. For example, future studies could collect data from a much larger group of participants. It would also be interesting to establish what effect this conversational teaching style might have on students overall academic progress over the duration of several years.

Additionally, future studies could also investigate different grade levels. The elementary students in this study were engaged and eager to participate. How would middle grade or higher grade English learners fair when asked to express their ideas or take a stance interpreting literature? Would data collected from English learners from diverse backgrounds show different trends and findings?

Another aspect that could be further investigated is how effective conversations can deepen the understanding of non-fiction texts in science, social studies, or

mathematics. If students learn to take a critical stance when reading fiction, they might be able to apply this skill when reading content area literature, as well.

Although this study was so limited in scope and scale, the participating students benefited by learning to express and elaborate on ideas about texts. Hopefully, researchers will continue to investigate the effectiveness of instructional talk for diverse language learners to extend the benefits to a larger group of ESL students.

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